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The Pavilion

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The Pavilion

IF YOU take an average commuter on a bus, going to or from work, and take away the reason for his work and the family he's going from or to, what sort of creature would you come up with? Every man has his background, his home base, where he's safe while his foot rests there on that one spot. Take away the base and take away the game and the man is a senseless creature in a senseless place.

I guess maybe that's a simplified way of putting it, but that's how I was. Off base, and the game had run away. Maybe Ed Krauseheimer, the office manager down at Merrill's, would have put it another way. I never did ask him, so I never did know. Ed kind of started things sometime last September when he got tired of looking at my long face and asked if I wanted to take a field job. Springdale was the location, a small prairie city on the banks of a small river some 250 miles out of our general area, a good-sized job that would last some two and a half years, and they needed a good man and would I take it — and I did.

And then maybe Bev, my wife, would have put it another way. She's more inclined to divide things down a practical middle, give each half a touch of tenderness, and then take the biggest. So she wasn't so enthusiastic about going someplace we'd never been and giving up what we'd worked so hard to get, but I guess she could see city life and commuting had me down by the throat. Anyway, she gave a grudging assent and tried to be cheerful about it, but I was still wearing a long face and wasn't feeling cheerful about much of anything.

My first day in Springdale I found a fine old house at the end of a street that led to the city square. The house was set off from the rest of the town a ways, and the closest

neighbor was a full block towards the square. A country road ran in front of the old place. It sat in a snow-covered yard of about four acres. It was a nice yard, and I knew Bev would like it. I liked the dusty old realtor who rented the place to me, too. We stood in a bedroom on the second floor together, and he told me some wild tale about an old lady who owned the house some years back dying in a fit of madness in that very room. I figured I'd keep that story to myself. Bev was leery enough about things already.

Next morning I busied myself with making out cost sheets and nosing around for a carpentry foreman. I went to the job site and shot a couple of bench marks and kept myself occupied with ignoring the curious stares of the townspeople. Later, I stopped by to pay a visit to Max Krahler, the owners' representative on the job, and trade some small talk. I didn't want to get too friendly with Max at the outset of things.

The rest of the afternoon I spent over my typewriter in the second-floor bedroom making out reports and contemplating a thin streak of the iced-over river visible through the naked trees. It was after dinner uptown when I finally decided to quit for the night. I was a little upset about something or other, but I can't remember what it was. The last recollection before sleep closed in was the cramped tenseness of a damp mattress on a hard floor and the steady hiss of the gas burner. At the time I never knew what happened. Some time in the night I found myself drawing to a sitting position with stomach muscles taut, shaking my head to a shrill noise that pierced my ears. I was up and in motion down the stairs, my fingers scrabbling on the walls and feet tearing at loose threads in the carpet. At the corner up which I was facing, my feet slipped on the wedge-shaped steps and shoved my back across the wall. It was then I realized that the high whining scream that filled the stair well was my own. Somehow I turned and stumbled into the living room, and there I gained control of my voice. Then I was alone with my whistling breath and the flickering of the gas burner reflecting down the stair well. I walked to the bathroom crammed beneath

the stairs, and my sweating palms felt the coolness of the lavatory beneath them. I reached for the string in the light fixture and sucked in my breath at the face suddenly staring at me from the shining mirror. Hair stood straight on end, and eyes were wide and pop-eyed, straining in their sockets. From right to left, the face was drawn down by a muscular spasm that distorted the mouth into a diagonal slash, with the lower lip thrown out in an idiot-like looseness. I pulled the string again. Darkness. I came up flat against the door and leaned there till my scraping fingers found the knob. I went up the stairs and somehow threw some clothes on. I was out and running in the drive, my feet making noises in the snow, with no realization of anything but the eyes and lips of that twisted face in the wall.

At the end of the drive I stopped and looked at the house. Windows cleaved in black, empty sockets and through the second-story window a yellow glow flickered weakly. I turned and could see the blue-white lights of the city square down the long dark avenue, and a solemn procession of streets lights seemed to lead there.

I wasn't running now but walking fast and starting in impatient skips toward that source of light and humanity. As I came abreast of the first house, a great bulk and racket hurtled from some dark porch, and my foot slipped on the ice as I jerked to the center of the street. On my hands and knees, I listened as the noise drew closer. In a final bracing I straightened on my knees, both hands held wide, prepared to close with the thing that had stopped short to scrabble and snarl in the frozen snow, just out of reach, maddened by the permeation of fear about me, yet fearing that permeation.

As the noise receded to a slow growl deep in the throat, I rose to my feet, backed slowly away, turned, and started toward the square once more, ignoring the pad of four feet behind me and the full outcry of dogs, spreading the alarm across town.

I must have walked around the court house three times before the thought of being seen rather than not seeing occurred to me. Midway between one of the facing blocks I paused in an alley, and my eyes on the clock face

of the tower caught three o'clock. Three o'clock. Five more hours before the return of civilization and daylight. Why was I in such a crying need for a humanity I had rejected? A sudden stirring in the alley caught my attention and I turned to face into the blackness. The wild yowling of some stray cat started me out toward the square, but I turned and backed against the wall of the building.

Max, I thought, Max Krahler. He's a friend, be glad to see me. Any time — just drop in. He's said that. Let's see, he lives on the other side of the square down that street to the north. Lord, that's a dark street. This hill is steep. Well, which house is his? All the way down, I guess; right on the opposite edge of that little ravine. That's it. What will he say? Nothing. He's a warm-hearted individual and I'm a fellow human in need. What do I look like? Feet barren of socks, unlaced shoes, pants over pajamas, beltless, a skivie shirt, and my old field jacket. Not exactly the rising young executive Krauseheimer had painted to him. Well, Krauseheimer isn't here and Krauseheimer isn't scared, and damn his supercilious attitude anyway. You're pretty silly though, fellow. It's three o'clock in the morning, and you're dropping in for coffee. In all fairness, you don't get an expense account to impress people with and run around at night wrecking that impression. He's getting up. There's a light. He's up anyhow. He won't mind a caller now. You can tell him you're just looking the town over. No, I can't even swallow that. You thought of something? What? Why not tell him a little of the truth. He's through. There goes the light.

It was dark again, and I turned toward the square. Suddenly I remembered the depot, and I thought of the people, the station agent, a clerk maybe. Some passengers, perhaps. Waiting for an early trip to the city. But the depot wasn't any better. I stood on the platform outside and watched a lonely agent shuffling and sorting papers behind his grill. Alone and untouchable in his proficiency, ready to tell you the time the first passenger train would leave, but impersonally denying the right of conversation to any but his fellow trainmen.

I pulled up my sheepskin collar and walked across

the street, ignoring the lights of the square. I could hear my footsteps again, and, rather than turn towards the square, I followed where each step led, one after the other.

I was somewhere close to the old house again, standing between two low stone walls, looking at a huge pavilion set in the center of a park. I walked through the low stone walls, and my flesh began to crawl skin-tight as I walked into the center of the structure. Overhead the roof climbed pyramid-like in a truss construction that culminated somewhere above me. I walked to a row of rotting planks that ran in tiers around three sides. I sat down.

Somewhere a dog still barked, and the muscles in my chest were taut once more. The old pavilion creaked in the moaning wind, and a thicker, stronger blackness seemed to penetrate the night. All that surrounded me seemed to be crystal-clear and cracking with a sharpness that pricked every nerve. My mind was accelerating so fast I could only absorb and throw impressions onto the racing treadmill. Comprehension was beyond me.

Where did it start, this longing? Did it awake full in the night, suddenly there, born from nothing, leading to a lifeless form, eyes strained in sockets to peer into the night till morning and men came to carry it away. No. It started with me. Some way it should end with me. The wind moaned and the pavilion creaked and the wind chilled the dampness in my hair and down my neck, and I thanked myself for grabbing the old field coat. I hunched down deeper and listened to the loose leaves scrabbling across the frozen snow. It started with me. I was the start, the game and the end. The rules were mine to make.

I heard something flutter or flap and shut my eyes to show myself it was just a leaf. No longer could I lay blame on my surroundings. These were my doings. A new way for a new life would have to come from me.

As I sat on the rotting plank in the pavillion, something moved in the night. My breath quieted to a silent mist. A great swooping flutter came across the park. A high-pitched shriek shattered the stillness, and under the peak of the pavilion a great black shape flew in and rose formless above me.

On my feet, I let out my breath in a pent-up gust. An owl. Nothing more. There was a grayness to the night now, and somewhere I heard the throbbing of a diesel down along the tracks in the river valley. Dawn was on its way, and as I threw my shoulders back sharply to break the cramps, I heard the diesel cut back for the coast through town.

I walked back across town to the old house at the end of the street. Many nights would come before I would forget this one. Nights without fear, without wakefulness, with only rest from the hard realities and peace for the soft insights.

I climbed the stairs to the hiss of the burner and propped up the fallen window with the stick which had slipped to the floor. I sat on the edge of the mattress, and suddenly I was tired. Exhausted clear through. I lay back on the mattress and listened drowsily to the clatter and crash of an old pickup bouncing on the crudely surfaced road in front of the old Victorian house in the city of Springdale.

Sam Sample, Arch. 5



The Awakening

EVEN after I had gained consciousness, my eyes took in the surroundings only gradually. I had the impression of swimming up into the room from some quite different world, a sort of underwater world far beneath it.

"How many do you see?"

The doctor's fingers seemed to move in a sort of dance, weaving in and out, disappearing behind one another and reappearing again. I shut my eyes, then opened them. Innumerable fingers, like moving columns, were still streaming past in either direction, crossing and recrossing. I shut my eyes again.

Robert Collins, Sc. & H. Jr.